**3. “The possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility.”**

**Evaluate this claim.**

Knowledge can be obtained by a person and by possessing that knowledge the person has an ethical responsibility for it. This claim suggests that by merely knowing something we have an ethical responsibility for it. Surely ethical responsibility can only be established once the knower decides what to do with his knowledge and not simply because the knower possesses it. This ambiguity within the statement leaves room for misinterpretation. However to a large extent, by possessing knowledge, we do carry a responsibility to decide whether that knowledge ought to be shared or not and how that knowledge ought to be used. These decisions made involve ethics which are judgements of what we believe to be right or wrong. Thus in most cases the claim can be justified and the possession of knowledge can be argued to indeed carry an ethical responsibility.

Ethics are the moral principles that govern a person's or a group's behaviour. It refers to how we should act, not how we do or how we have. We use ethics to analyse decisions, beliefs, and actions. What we define as ethically correct can be based upon various theories examples of such being utilitarianism, deontology and virtue theories. Utilitarianism is when we base a decision in terms of whether it will most likely produce the greatest pleasure for the greatest number. Deontology is when we base our decisions in terms of whether it is a principled decision, one based on a general rule of conduct which can be universalised. Virtue theories justify a decision about an act or omission in terms of whether it is done in accordance with virtue and whether our decisions develop ourselves into ethically better human beings. When we have an ethical responsibility for something, we have the responsibility to use, share or keep it in such a way that it will be what we define as, ethically correct.

There are two main ways of knowing in which we may attempt to determine what is most ethically correct and not namely reason and emotion. We often use reason to judge and weigh the consequences, motives and benefits of possessing certain pieces of knowledge and what we decide to do with it. On the other hand, we use emotion as a way of knowing as well and this influences our decision on what we decide to do with our knowledge. Depending on the emotional state of the knower, knowledge may be used for good will or alternatively emotion may influence one to use it for wrong doing.

Though the claim suggests that the possession of knowledge carries an ethical responsibility, there are certain areas of knowledge where this does not necessarily apply such as Mathematics. If a student in a classroom is familiar with basic mathematical skills and knows that the square root of 25 is 5, there is little reason for the person to carry any sort of ethical responsibility for knowing it. Knowing that the square root of 25 is 5 does not potentially bring about any good or bad to mankind whether he decides to share it or not. Furthermore, whether he decides to share it with the other students in his classroom or not is not necessarily determined by his ethics as the knowledge that the square root of 25 is 5 is supposedly known by everyone else in the classroom. Thus it is justified that the knower does not have an ethical responsibility through possessing knowledge that is already known by his or her surroundings.

However, one can justify that the possession of knowledge does indeed carry an ethical responsibility. Assuming that ethical responsibility is established by simply possessing the knowledge and not having decided as yet what to do with it, the possession of knowledge (especially undiscovered or unknown) carries an ethical responsibility. This is evident in Natural Science as an area of knowledge. Over centuries, there have been many discoveries made by scientists and doctors in their fields of study that have helped improve the lives of mankind and also some discoveries that have done the opposite and have harmed it. By simply possessing undiscovered knowledge, one carries the ethical responsibility to either share it or keep it from others. Furthermore, ethical responsibility is established when the possessor decides how to apply or what to do with his knowledge. Dr. Maurice Hilleman, an American microbiologist, is well known for discovering and developing over 36 vaccines, 14 of which are most commonly used vaccines today. His measles vaccine alone is estimated to prevent 1 million deaths worldwide every year. Dr. Hilleman carried an ethical responsibility to decide if and with whom he should share his knowledge of undiscovered vaccines as well as his improvements for already discovered vaccines with. By sharing his knowledge with the public this would have and has benefitted many lives throughout the world. If Dr. Hilleman had chosen not to have shared his knowledge and discoveries about vaccines, we cannot be sure that another person would soon or ever make the same discoveries as him and many lives would have been lost because he had chosen to keep his knowledge to himself.

Another, more interesting instance of ethical responsibility is the ethical dilemma faced by Albert Einstein in 1940. The commencement of the atom bomb project in the United States was predominantly due to a letter Einstein had written to President Franklin Roosevelt warning of the destructive potential of an atomic chain reaction as well as the possibility of atomic weapons being produced in Germany. Einstein, knowing the extreme danger associated with atomic weapons, made the ethical decision to share his knowledge with the United States government so that they could put a stop to Germany before they could develop atomic weapons and potentially cause mass destruction. However, putting a stop to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Germany would mean the development of WMD in the United States. This was a consequence Einstein had to consider and debate upon. The result was that Germany was not able to develop atomic weapons in time before the United States and the atomic bomb intended for Germany, was dropped in Japan leading to massive devastation. In hindsight, Einstein said, “Had I known that the Germans would not succeed in producing an atomic bomb, I never would have lifted a finger.” Perhaps if Einstein had chosen not to expose Germany’s plan for an atomic bomb then the thousands of lives in Japan would have been spared. Then again, if he had chosen not to share his knowledge with the United States, perhaps Germany would have produced an atomic bomb eventually potentially putting more lives at stake. When facing an ethical dilemma such as this, the knower carries an ethical responsibility to decide first whether to share his knowledge and to then secondly decide how to use his knowledge and to whose benefit. In order to make an ethically correct decision, the knower must reflect upon his choices and make a decision of how to use his knowledge in terms of either which decision would bring about the greatest pleasure for the greatest number, which decision follows his and societies principles regardless of the situation at hand or which decision would make him a better person according to his own virtues. Thus, in situations where the possession of knowledge may affect others, the knower must have ethical responsibility for his or her knowledge.

 It is further argued that one carries ethical responsibility for knowledge that has been obtained in the past. The knowledge we gather and learn from past events helps us make better ethical decisions in the future. It was only after the abolition of segregation and introduction of equal human rights for all peoples did the United States choose to put sanctions up against South Africa during the Apartheid era. Knowledge gained from a country's own transgressions forced it to act upon that knowledge and attempt to prevent segregation and discrimination from happening again. Over time the ethics of people and societies change. With time, the United States as a society believed that the discrimination and segregation to which they subjected people in their society was ethically incorrect. With possession of that knowledge, they felt an ethical responsibility to act upon it in such a way that it would result in them being ethically better peoples (referring to the virtue theory). It is this knowledge they have learned from their own actions that helped make their decision to force South Africa to change the ways in which their country was run which was (as they believed to be) the right thing to do as it went according to their principles and would result in a great deal of happiness by a great number of people. Thus by possessing knowledge from the past we have an ethical responsibility to use that knowledge to make more ethically correct decisions.

In conclusion, the possession of knowledge does carry an ethical responsibility. While there are instances where one can argue the claim to be false, it is more evident and can be justified to a larger extent that the possession of knowledge does indeed carry an ethical responsibility. Possessing knowledge produces an understanding of the consequences and implications of that knowledge which brings about responsibility. Once knowledge is possessed, you must become accountable for the ways in which it may affect you, other people, or your surroundings. With the possession of knowledge, you have the responsibility to weigh the consequences and decide whether knowledge ought to be shared or not and how the knowledge ought to be used using your ethics.

Word Count: 1599